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ABSTRACT

In New Zealand, schools are given decile rankings based on census reports of parental socioeconomic status. An ongoing project seeks to identify beliefs and attitudes that make a teacher's work successful in low-decile primary schools in the greater Auckland area. This paper focuses on three teachers whose professional practice was considered exceptional by colleagues and outside academics. All three were of European descent and worked in low-decile elementary schools where most students were of Maori or Pacific Island descent. Interviews were conducted with the teachers, their principal, teaching colleagues, Board of Trustees members, and community members with children enrolled in the school. The interviews revealed key common attributes. All three teachers articulated a clear and strong philosophical approach to teaching that included commitment to the empowerment of learners. Underlying this commitment were beliefs about children: (1) children can be self-managing learners if they have structures and routines, high teacher expectations, and positive role models; (2) children are community members, they should be taught social skills, and their cultural backgrounds should be valued and included in school; and (3) children can succeed if someone believes in them and they have a safe, noncompetitive environment. All three teachers were lifelong learners who shared a personal and public passion for learning. The teachers shared strong loving relationships with children and created caring environments in their classrooms and the school. (Contains 20 references.) (SV)

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Introduction

In the past decade New Zealand, like many other capitalist countries, has been undergoing neo-liberal reform. These reforms have been in economic and policy areas. The state has retreated from its previously benevolent interventionist stance, to its current 'rolled back position' which is a 'fundamental tenet of any structural adjustment programme' (Kelsey 1995: 115). As a direct result of these reforms, working class and unemployed people in this country have reached a level of poverty previously unknown. There have been financial cutbacks in the provision of all state services; cutbacks which have been particularly noticeable in the areas of welfare provision and health services.

The reform process has also been very noticeable in the state funded Education system. At the same time as schools struggled to meet their financial obligations, teachers' work conditions and autonomy have been reduced. As the education system has become more controlled, the rhetoric of teacher accountability has gained momentum (Robertson 1998; Sullivan 1997). Teachers in New Zealand's low decile schools², in particular, have been at the receiving end of media attacks on teachers. The Education Review Office³ maintains that teachers in low decile schools are partly, and in some cases largely, to blame for the under achievement of students within those schools.

While this paper is concerned with student achievement within low decile schools, it is not our intention to enlarge on existing deficit or structural explanations for the failure of the education system. We accept that structural changes have had a negative effect on the education of lower socio-economic groups in New Zealand (Carpenter and Bell 1994; Kelsey 1995; Olssen and Matthews 1997; Thrupp 1996). We also accept as a given that structural changes which are equity based are imperative if all children are going to have the opportunity to reach their potential.

The particular focus of this paper is on three teachers whose professional practice within Auckland's low decile schools is considered to be very successful, or exceptional. This paper presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing project which is called 'Kaiako toa - Exceptional teachers in low decile schools'. This project has ethical approval from the Auckland College of Education. The aim of the complete project is to identify beliefs and attitudes which make a teacher's work successful in decile one to three primary schools in the greater Auckland area. The research methods of the project are qualitative and involve a series of semi-structured interviews.

For the entire project, nine teachers were identified as exceptional. These teachers were first nominated, confidentially, by academics (lecturers and school advisers) employed by ACE. An approach was then made by one of the writers to the principal of the nominee's school. If the principal agreed that the nominated teacher was an exceptional teacher within her/his school, then a

¹ We acknowledge the financial support of Auckland College of Education for this research project

² Decile rankings are allocated by the Ministry of Education, based on Census reports. The ranking, from 1 (lowest) through to 10 (highest) is based on: parents' occupations, household crowding, parents' educational qualifications, income support (welfare) payments received by parents, Pasifika and/or Maori ethnicity of students. Low decile schools are essentially schools in poor socio-economic areas.

³ The Education Review Office was established post the reforms. It is a monitoring body which is required to issue regular reports on individual schools. The ERO provides the media with copies of these reports.

formal invitation was extended to the teacher to be involved in the project. The nominated teachers each had one or two interviews. Also interviewed were a 'pod' of people who knew of the teacher's practice; they were asked to discuss the work of the teacher. One of the pod of people was the school principal. The other three were nominated by the teacher and comprised: a teaching colleague, a Board of Trustees (BOT) member and a person from the community who had at least one child enrolled in the school. All names, including school names, are given pseudonyms within the project.

This paper is the result of the analysis of the first three pods of interviews. The three exceptional teachers discussed in this paper are Catherine, Eve and Bev. All are Pakeha⁴ women, and all are working in schools where the majority of the students are Maori or of Pacific Island descent. Eve and Bev are aged between 45 and 55 and have been teaching for approximately 20 years. Catherine has been teaching for three years. Eve and Bev teach 5 - 6 year olds, and Catherine teaches 10 year olds.

The key common attributes which emerged in the pods of interviews surrounding these women were: clearly articulated and manifested philosophical approaches to teaching, a personal and public passion which positioned themselves as learners, and an obvious ability to create a strong sense of connectedness within their classrooms and the wider school environment. This paper addresses each of these aspects, in the above order. Interspersed with empirical findings from the fifteen interviews are theoretical and research based insights. Following a summary, the conclusion positions the findings described in this paper as possible indicators for successful pedagogy in Auckland's low decile schools.

Exceptional teachers have a philosophical approach which they can articulate and manifest

What united the three teachers in this study was that they articulated a clear, strong, and in many respects compatible, philosophical approach to teaching. Philosophy in this context we define as beliefs and values about people and children and how they should learn and behave. All three teachers had strong beliefs about themselves, about their teaching, about children and learning, and about the kind of school which would enable them to carry out their philosophy. Catherine's philosophy is indicated in the following quote. In Duffy's terms this statement demonstrates an emphasis on an independent spirit based on a personal sense of purpose (1999).

I felt quite strongly about my beliefs about teaching.... I felt my beliefs about teaching and learning married with the school's philosophy (Catherine).

A strong theme running through each of these teachers' philosophies was a commitment to the empowerment of learners. One community member recounted a number of anecdotes that demonstrated Bev's commitment to encouraging the children to become independent competent learners.

These three teachers had beliefs about children that were underpinned by a value and practice of empowerment that manifested itself in the following beliefs:

- children as self-managing learners
- children as community members
- children as succeeders

Each of these beliefs will be further enlarged on in the following sections along with examples from the teachers' practices.

⁴ Pakeha is a Maori word which in this context means non Maori, and of European descent. People of the Pacific Islands often refer to Pakeha as Palagi.

Children as self-managing learners:

In order for children to be responsible for their own learning the three teachers believed that children should have structure and routines, that there should be high expectations and standards on the part of the teacher, and that children should have positive role models. The teachers believed that, together, these aspects could encourage children to become self-disciplined in their learning. Dewey wrote that the ideal aim of education was the creation of the power of self control (1916).

The three teachers believed that children should be valued as learners, and children should be risk takers. Risk taking was seen to encourage children to become involved in their own learning, leading to independence. Also, for learning to take place, it was considered necessary to engage children in a variety of activities, and for children to have fun while learning. This endorses Haberman's view that learning cannot take place 'in a classroom where mistakes are not allowed' (1995, p 780). Bev stated 'it's okay to take risks.... they've got to be able to take risks because if they don't they'll just stay the same'.

That children 'learn best by doing' was expressed by Eve along with a recognition that 'not every child in the class has got the same learning style' and that 'you've got to give opportunities for children to learn through their own learning styles'.

Bev's community person shared one of her experiences about her two children who had been in Bev's class. She recounted how Bev didn't treat all children the same way. When her daughter who was the elder child went to school she 'had a lot' whereas her son 'went to school with very little ...' This parent recounted how she felt a failure because, although she was a trained teacher herself, she couldn't teach her son many things. Whereas Bev 'was able to pull out what (her son) can do ... she showed me that she took (her son) from where he was at and built on that, and he's away ... I was really impressed by that'.

In expressing her thoughts on routines and learning (which were interwoven with her beliefs about discipline) Catherine shared 'I think a lot of management is to do with the kids managing themselves.' However routines didn't mean that learning or the classroom was unexciting, '....we have routines, but within that routine we have difference' (Catherine).

Catherine talked about incorporating content from the Information Link professional development programme which she and thirteen other teaching staff had engaged in during the previous year. As part of her self managing reading programme with older children, groups worked at different stages and activities. Some worked on presentations, others on painting, 'and kids (were) making overhead projections and making slide shows on the computer'. The children had 'spent weeks up to this stage finding information and locating things and ringing up people and that's all part of their reading programme'. Some children had also been out into the community to interview; others had gone to the library and had sent off faxes requesting information.

An added advantage of having established routines and expectations was that it helped relievers settle into the class. Bev's colleague, Margaret, shared an experience she had with Bev's new entrants class of five year olds '... the children (were) empowered to be running their own classroom'. She said that when she had relieved in Bev's class the children quietly informed her if she tried to establish different routines or practices to Bev's. In many ways the classroom routines were so well established that Margaret reported feeling redundant at times. Bev articulated the importance of being consistent:

... one of the things relievers always say to me, your kids know exactly what is expected of them and that's really important for these children I think. In particular because sometimes the lives they come from are very inconsistent. They know that I am always consistent, that the rules or the management or whatever it is expected of them is the same all the time, and the consequences are the same all the time (Bev).

Eve maintained that when children feel secure and 'know where their boundaries are (then they) are happy, want to learn, feel they can have a go at things without getting into trouble'. Bev

reinforced this view: 'let them get on with it and they know what to expect ... (school is) a lovely place they can come to ... they look forward to it and they are happy'. For these children there is a shift from what Wood (1992) terms an external to an internal locus of control. The teacher's beliefs and pedagogy are aimed at ensuring their children are involved in such a shift.

Consistency, praise and setting high standards were seen as an integral aspect of empowering children to be self managing learners. Eve said that she used praise and told the children when they had done really well, but she also told them that they could do more: 'if you create in the children that, yes, you are pleased with them *and* make them believe that they can do more, they will do more'. Having high expectations and expressing these to learners is an important practice for teachers to engage in (Ediger 1987). As Catherine noted 'I really try to push them on and they seem to achieve quite well'. This commitment to extending learners was reinforced by Eve:

If you keep telling them they're fantastic and give them beautiful stickers, they're not going to do that little bit extra for you tomorrow.... you've got to keep raising those standards and keep pushing for them (Eve).

Children as community members:

The children's respective cultures and social environments were given recognition, and were valued, by the teachers. Many of the children taught by these teachers were from ethnic minority groups. Respect was shown for the fact that many pupils were the carers and teachers of others; the respective communities the children belonged to were held in high regard by the three teachers.

Dewey wrote 'the individual who is to be educated is a social individual... If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction..' (Dworkin 1959: 22). Catherine believed that one of the reasons children came to school was to learn about 'how to manage themselves socially and about being responsible' and she maintained that it was part of her role to teach the children in her class social skills and self discipline. Catherine's colleague disclosed that Catherine ensured the children were independent learners by 'facilitating learning rather than being directive about it.... she's giving children freedom to choose and to work on independent contracts..'

One way of enabling students to be empowered is to teach them social skills so they can take turns at being leaders, at co-operating with each other and participating in decision making (Sullivan and King 1998). Catherine talked about allowing the children to have some control and choice whereby they can opt into learning experiences. This 'acknowledges that different people are good at different things and we can all learn from each other'.

While none of the teachers came from the same social or cultural background as their children, the teachers believed there was a need to recognise the sociocultural values of their children along with 'a distinctive pattern of social relationships that embodies an ethos of caring' (Corson 1998: 34). One of the BOT members who himself came from an ethnic minority group was emphatic that the cultural background of the teacher or a cultural match with the students didn't matter as long as education and learning was happening (Eve's BOT member).

Catherine stated that she didn't think teachers needed to be of the same culture as their children, as 'long as you are really aware of the kid's culture and give things a go outside your own culture, then kids see that as an acceptance. ... They are just very responsive to things that relate to their own culture'. However she was adamant that implementation of children's culture into the school was a planned process and that 'we're very conscious of it. It doesn't happen by accident'.

Children as succeeders:

In order to succeed, the teachers believed that children needed not only to have someone believe in them, but to have a safe non-judgmental and non-competitive environment:

I just think that children have to feel really comfortable with what you expect of them and not feel threatened ... you just start from where they're at, no matter where they're at, with making no judgments whatsoever and they will learn (Bev)

I'm not really into competitiveness although that's part of the essential skills these days..... I think competitiveness, I use it more in terms of can I better myself. I'm competing with myself more....I think that type of competitiveness is good, it's pushing yourself (Catherine).

All of the teachers in our study passionately believed that their children could succeed at school and they had high aspirations for their students beyond school. As Bev's principal so aptly put it 'I imagine she has got a belief that children have a right no matter where they are to invest in the best education they can possibly get'. In answer to a question regarding whether she thought there were some children who could not be taught, Bev answered 'No! Absolutely not. I would be offended (at such a thought). Bev said in her experience all children blossom, 'You never give up... if you set the right conditions for them they will learn'.

Bev, along with Eve and Catherine, demonstrated by their words that they were fiercely committed to enacting, rather than merely articulating, the achievement of high levels of success with all their children (Scheurich 1998: 461).

Eve's principal said Eve was dedicated to the school, she 'works 100% all the time. She's go, go, go'. Eve's colleague noted she 'fights tooth and nail for the best for her class' and her BOT member said 'she has a passion for teaching, more than a need to survive'. According to Ediger (1987) beliefs pertaining to education need to be expressed. In expressing their beliefs about learning Catherine, Eve and Bev seemed to have developed what Duffy (1999) terms 'a sense of alignment'. In Duffy's terms, this is where teachers' personal beliefs and values, or philosophies, come into line with their professional desires for the children they teach.

Exceptional teachers are lifelong learners

It appears from the first pod of interviews that a characteristic which all of the teachers share is a personal and public passion for learning. The passion is personal in that it encompasses professional learning (as in aspects of staff development), but it is not exclusive to professional learning. It is public because these teachers are able to communicate their passion for learning and the gaining of new knowledge to their pupils and their colleagues. This section examines aspects of these teachers' attitudes towards learning.

Undoubtedly, learning associated with formal teacher professional development has played an important and ongoing part in the expertise of these women teachers. It appears that some of the development which these teachers have participated in has really enhanced their teaching. We suggest that the professional development which has achieved this is more likely to be the kind in which they experienced with other teachers, such as the benefits of: group learning, talking to learn, having time to reflect, having fun while learning, and building on what they already knew (Butler 1992).

The chairperson of the BOT in Eve's school said of her 'she (Eve) has the ability to learn, so that the cycle is continuous'. Eve spoke of the impact which attending a Teaching English as a second or other Language (TESOL) had on her teaching, and of how she had persuaded four people from her school to enrol in the same course. As this course is taught within the institution in which we work we are cognisant of the fact that the pedagogy of the course encompasses all of Butler's points made above:

To help all this I decided about five years ago to do a Diploma in TESOL at (Auckland College of Education) and I did that with Anne (ACE lecturer)... just to give me a wider insight into helping these children with their second language, and it was brilliant. So I think that was why I was so supportive of (another teacher within her school also doing the course) because I really

understood that this was the way, or I believe it's the way, we've got to go to give these children a fair opportunity.

(Attending the course on my part) ... was like looking for answers. the children weren't making the progress, we were finding it difficult to get started. ... I think it (the TESOL course) definitely improved my teaching ability with the second year ... and (taught me) not to take so much for granted and to break things down into much smaller steps. Anne is brilliant, she's so practical.

Well I think my learning style is really important, to look at the learning style. A lot of these Polynesian children are kinaesthetic learners, they are not a 'sit-there, listen and write' (kind of learner). They learn best by doing and that's why I like Sue's lectures. As well, I came out with lots of 'hands-on' ways the children can do these activities and I like - in the junior classes - a more developmental type of programme (Eve).

Catherine spoke of how she was aware of her inadequacies when she was a beginning teacher and how she learned with the support of other teachers. She articulated a joy of learning when she shared how she became the Information Technology co-ordinator within her school:

When I started teaching I felt quite nervous about the teaching of art, visual art, but from support from other teachers here I've come a long way and now I feel like I can tackle it and I feel quite confident about teaching it....you know I've learnt heaps in that area. I've just learned so much. I've been thrust into the role of IT co-ordinator for the school so I'm 'technology girl'. I think I got thrust into that because I could format a disk or something really simple like that, so now we have a network of 25 computers and a server and all this sort of technical stuff that I'm responsible for. I've had to learn so much about that, you're learning all the time.

We help each other a lot at this school with things like that. It's not really up to the individual teacher, I mean it is because in the end either you use that help from other people or you don't. So it is up to me to make sure that I learn from what other people are showing me and telling me....as a school we are very supportive of each other in different strengths. 'I know about this, let me show you' (Catherine).

Catherine saw learning as a challenge, and something essential that her class saw her being involved in:

This learning curve has been so steep. I'd hate to feel that I was sitting somewhere and not learning. I expect to learn everyday and I really put myself in that position in front of the kids..... I don't mind making a fool of myself occasionally. I read too and I often make mistakes. I usually have three or four kids with a copy of the book that I'm reading and it doesn't bother me if I make mistakes. I just re-read, and go on, and just model strategies that I expect them to use. Its just modelling being a learner I think is important. I'll say to them we're going to do this, I haven't tried it before so we'll see if it works and if not then we'll think about why not and do it again. So you're not an expert on things (Catherine).

Bev's teaching colleague maintained that Bev was very interested in different learning styles. Bev recalled her childhood and how her own parents encouraged literacy from a very young age. She recalled being taken to the library from when she was two years old. Her family had a tradition of sitting in the lounge on a Friday evening, each person reading a pile of books:

My father used to sit in the lounge and read, (it didn't) matter if all our friends were there or who, and he would read aloud whatever it was. That kind of thing was a tradition in our family and I think that's where I get my learning philosophy from (Bev).

Bev's described the benefit she gained from attending a reading course:

I'll never forget a reading course I went on and I sat there and listened to this woman for two hours and it was just fantastic because it was something I needed to do when I was teaching Year

6 and I was thrown into this room of difficult children. I thought what am I going to do with these and went to this course and I got all the answers and I got all the literature. I went back and I used it and I used it for years and I thought that was a really worthwhile learning experience for me, just to sit and listen to her. Because she was so inspired that she just got through that message that I wanted, that I needed, at the time (Bev).

In his case study of a project of teacher professional development in Australia, Butler (1992: 233) states that it is important for teachers to see 'the self as responsible learner'. Butler's project demonstrated (p.236) that action learning, reflection, and taking responsibility for the self in the generation of educational practice, are difficult but intrinsically rewarding for many teachers.

In summary, Eve, Bev and Catherine all wanted to learn. They were excited by learning and others were aware of their passion. We suggest that this attitude to learning was an integral part of what made them exceptional teachers. While one would hope that all teachers shared this attitude it seems that this is not the case. Eve spoke of this matter:

It's not good to (say to) a teacher you have to go on a course on reading if that teacher already thinks what they're doing is really good and they're not interested in listening to change or new ways. They've got to want to learn like children have to want to learn.....learning and trialing new things interests me, I think in some ways I get bored sometimes with things the same way and I think, right, there must be a better way of doing this (Eve).

Haberman (1995) places strong emphasis on the importance of 'star' teachers being seen as learners by their students. The three teachers each brought out various aspects of Haberman's contentions in their interviews:

Stars interest their children in learning by modeling their own interest in learning. At various and numerous times, stars read books, write stories, compose pictures, build things, conduct experiments, and engage in the full range of learning behaviours in the presence of their students. Their children see their teacher as a lifelong student of subjects and pursuits; an individual with enthusiasm and passion for learning things in great depth.....It takes a teacher who is him or herself a learner to develop learners (Haberman 1995: 33-34).

Eve's principal stated:

(Eve's) looking for learning. They talk about the principal as the 'head learner', well she's the 'super learner'. She's very willing to share all her ideas with other people. She's a very good communicator (Eve's principal).

Exceptional teachers establish a strong sense of connectedness within their classrooms and in the wider school environment.

The three teachers in this study all share strong relationships with children. A central tenet is the loving nature of these relationships. While a connectedness is evident in the environment the teacher creates, we suggest that this connectedness goes beyond the established institutional spaces. Ultimately the teachers create structures that entitle all to have a sense of belonging. In this section we examine how others interpreted these teachers' 'loving' relationships. This section also highlights common affiliations in the building of these caring environments.

The three teachers were each very loyal to their schools. Belonging to the same school for a long period (at least two years) was considered important. The teachers believed it was one way to get to know the community better. '... whether you live in it or not you do become part of the community.... (the children) start to ... form a relationship with you and then they start to trust you..' (Bev). This leads to '... connecting, knowing the children and their background and that's really important..' (Eve). As Catherine stated 'I just think by knowing them better they feel cared for and if they like you and feel that you care about them then they try and work hard for you'.

It is apparent that these teachers build and sustain a positive and powerful understanding of the children they teach. Undoubtedly this requires caring, and loving, of the children. One of the ways teachers do this is through the loving environments created for their children. Scheurich describes this lovingness as 'not some action or interaction....., this lovingness is always there. It is pervasive, it inhabits everything they do or say' (Scheurich 1998: 464).

Community members spoke of this aspect of the teachers:

(re Catherine) *Being just a person out there. I don't know what makes a born teacher but we've all been brought up to this born teacher, she exerts love, she exerts caring, she exudes enthusiasm, she exudes that this is just her life...She believes that every child is a unique human being...that nurturing that some of them may need, that guidance that they all need and providing them with a safe non-hostile environment... if they're not comfortable..... they can reach out to her and say help me please (community member).*

(re Bev) *I think her belief that you have to have a heart for what you do and that's really evident...it isn't just the professional thing...it's her professionalism combined with heart for the kids, and what she does for the kids. Not just what she does but for kids as people (community member).*

Bev's BOT member said: 'She's just got this presence' and Catherine's colleague said 'she has a lovely tone, the children learn, they feel enthusiastic about their learning, they produce their work not only not so much for her but for their own success. It is a real partnership'.

Haberman (1995: 56) suggests that exceptional teachers also show their caring and respect by not exploiting their warm and close relationship with students. He suggests that this love does not intrude on the children's life space or resolve any of the teacher's unmet emotional needs. It is clear that all three teachers invest themselves in their children, taking time and energy to make individual commitments to them. They do not, however, exploit their relationships with students. For Eve the responsibility of teaching sometimes seemed close to the role of being a parent. She spoke of assuming the parent role in nurturing and supporting younger and needier children.

Bev's community person also spoke of what she saw as Bev's 'nurturing role'. Pere (1992: 15) stresses the importance of the total development of the individual within the context of family or whanau. In this context the teachers act as caring family members who establish a whanau ethos within the classroom. Undoubtedly the trust built with their children enables these teachers to serve as successful models in their classrooms. This lovingness is described by Scheurich (1998: 464) as a source of endless energy, which enables teachers to always do more for the children:

A little bit of me still wants to be a mother to these children because they need a motherly hand during the day...They need just general understanding and someone who will give them a cuddle and listen to them sort out their lunch and if they haven't got one and turn their clothes round the right way in the morning, all those motherly things come out of me, doing up their shoe laces and telling them to wash their faces. And I think I like that (Eve).

(re Bev) *There is a little boy, everyday she holds his hand and walks him down the road and waits there with him until his taxi comes. Its those little things, you don't have to go down there - he knows where to go. But she takes his hand and she walks him down and she waits there with the child (community member).*

Catherine's community member described the extra distance Catherine's investment went, and the impact that this had on her child:

(re Catherine)... *just little things like her maths, like Marama's got little funny home made badges which I know (Catherine has made) at home in her own time, in her own space. All those little things... they add up to a parent as well... little personal things. Then a letter towards the end of the year to Marama, and I know that Marama is not the only student who got one of those. She (Catherine) is very special, she's a sparkle (community member).*

Bev's colleague noted Bev's willingness to assume a broader role than that of just a teacher:

(re Bev) I believe she would work her fingers to the bone, regardless, any situation. If there weren't resources she would make them, she would create them and use her own money ... She puts her extra into it. It's determination, it's attitude (colleague)

From these comments it would appear that the children see these teachers as people they care about. The teachers are able to imbue in each individual child a sense of belonging, and an awareness that they are cared for, and should care for others. This is a shared foundational purpose to support each others' wellbeing. Scheurich describes such environments such as being ones that children want to go to every day: 'they are environments within which they feel treasured, valued and loved' (Scheurich 1998:463).

Bev tried to 'promote that 'every day' really happy loving kind of atmosphere' in her room. This included not only an attractive physical environment but one that was warm, safe, non threatening, varied and happy; an environment that's 'full of colour where children's work ... was presented really well'. Bev's community member talked about the 'wonderful learning environment ... I could spend a long time there just looking around her room....' The community member had already had two children pass through Bev's class and she said 'I've got one more child and I am gonna go beg that they put him in her class next year. Both my husband and I feel the same...' The BOT person also expressed similar sentiments.

Bev's colleague spoke of Bev's determination to establish her class learning environment. In particular, the colleague spoke highly of the way in which Bev worked with a special needs child:

(re Bev) She doesn't give up. She 's got a special need child in there.....she was always ready to reach out and shift David, re-direct him until he is not invisible in class. ...nobody imitated David. They sat and she explained that David needed to learn and other children helped. She created a very much caring atmosphere so other children helped model her behaviour too. She provides, she gets the children motivated and working away (colleague).

Catherine's community member describes the caring environment as something not linked to the classroom alone but also to the Catherine:

(re Catherine) I just watched her at camp.... I didn't mean to be watching her...but suddenly I was just spellbound by, once again, her calmness.....and that little aura she's got that she doesn't know that she's got. I'll never forget it the place was just chaos, pre-dinner, pre-shower, you know the phase and there was Catherine in one of the main sitting rooms sitting in the back with the guitar. She knew what would happen; within 10 minutes and suddenly she must have had 50 children all singing quietly with guitar (community member).

When asked about the importance of connectedness with her students and their families, Catherine commented 'It's huge. I think it's huge'. She related an experience she had with a difficult student during her first year of teaching:

He (the student) would come and say 'can I be in your class next year?'.....so I sort of made a special effort to say can I have him back because he was quite difficult for his (new) teacher. And now....I can say 'I remember two years ago when you did such and such and I thought that was great'. We had a relationship. We knew each other (Catherine)

It seemed also that the teachers needed to connect through the children to the environments they had created. In describing her husband's visits to the classroom Eve reveals her own pleasure of the inclusivity of the environment created:

My husband often pops in during the day and one child said one day when he was going out, 'is that your husband Miss?' ' Yes. ' He's palagi.. ' So they don't see me as palagi. He's the palagi. I thought it was nice, I'm one of them, they don't look at me and say you're a palagi. You're our teacher, you're one of us (Eve).

They (the students) come in, they hang around inside. They talk to you and they put on some music. They're at a good age for just hanging around with. I just feel that by knowing them better they feel cared for and they like you and feel you care about them. Then they try and work hard for you (Catherine)

These teachers have created an intangible caring world that extends beyond their classrooms. There is a sense of relatedness by others to this world. Haberman (Haberman 1995) maintained that successful teachers of children in poverty created an extended family within their classrooms. While the teachers in this study undoubtedly did this, their acceptance seemed to extend to parents and the community also. These teachers have created what Sergiovanni (1996) calls 'communities'. Sergiovanni defines communities as social structures that bind people together in a oneness, and that binds them to set of shared values and ideas:

(re Bev) Every parent would wait with me to comment on how they were so happy with the way she works with their child, that she was really caring. I think that caring thing came out big time. She is a wonderful person. It was just the way we saw her with our child, the way our child was coming home....she would be someone I would never forget. And there is ... I feel really connected to her in some ways just because of what she has done with my children (community member).

(re Catherine) I think she gives them confidence that they haven't looked at why they've got it.....they see this power she has which is a kindness, a charm, a calmness to me which has such power that I would love a bit of it (community member).

These three teachers have a love for their students and a deep commitment to establishing powerful and caring communal spaces for themselves and their children. In these spaces they can intrinsically motivate learning that fits, supports, engages and energises their children. Such an investment from the teachers also establishes trusting, collaborative relationships with all those who surround their practice. All of the teachers are active agents in the social world not only of the children, but also indirectly of their parents, and the wider school community.

To be effective and in this case exceptional, it would seem that it is not only the teachers' own learning and philosophy that engages students, but a pervasive loving approach which deepens the success of the classroom climate. To understand and influence the motivation of students it is clear that these teachers intimately know who their students naturally (and culturally) are. The teachers are able to make a difference because they provide loving accepting conditions that deliver a sense of belonging and of being loved.

Summary

Against this background it is not difficult to begin to identify the beliefs and attitudes which make a teacher's work successful in a low decile school. While generalisations should not be made from three pods of interviews which involve fifteen people, we suggest that these three case studies give an indication of what is required for exceptional practice in low decile schools.

These exceptional teachers, Bev, Catherine and Eve, each saw their role as being the empowerer of children's learning, rather than the holder and giver of knowledge (Freire 1972). They all believed that children should be encouraged to be independent risk takers as far as their own learning was concerned; they believed that mistakes which made in a safe, positive environment led to learning. They all emphasised the importance of structure and routine within their classrooms, and placed considerable importance on having high expectations of, and aspirations for, all students. Despite all being Pakeha (or Palagi) and of a different ethnic background to the majority of their students, each one of them demonstrated a high regard and respect for the communities and cultures to which the children belonged. Partially this respect was demonstrated by the sustained commitment each had to her respective school. All of these women could easily have gained promotion to another school, their reputations would facilitate this, yet they had all consciously chosen to stay, in the short term at

least, in their current school. Of the three women, Catherine - the younger teacher - seems more likely to seek promotion. The other two, Bev and Eve, stated a preference for classroom practice.

Catherine, Bev and Eve were lifelong learners. Learning excited them and they were able to communicate this passion to their students and colleagues. Thus they modelled what they were trying to teach.

Finally these teachers had an unconditional form of love for every one of their students. By manifesting this affection and acceptance, the teachers were able to create an environment within their classrooms and in their relationships with the school community which gave a sense of security to children and respect from all of their caregivers. We suggest that parents, consciously or subconsciously, know whether their child's teacher genuinely likes and values their child.

These women did not have a 'missionary zeal' (Lee 1987) - this was not their reason for working in low socio-economic schools. They were not there to 'save the masses'. Perhaps the most notable aspect which emerged in these pods of interviews was the humble nature of each of the three teachers. All were uncomfortable about being identified as exceptional and required an assurance that their colleagues would not know of their participation in the research project. While they were proud of the work they were doing they preferred to 'just get on and do it' rather than be involved in anything too public. People like these exceptional teachers are unlikely to make headlines in the *New Zealand Herald*⁵, but they are out there in many schools, making a difference daily to the lives of children.

Conclusion

Part of the purpose of this research project was to provide some balance in public perceptions of teachers working in low decile schools. A concurrent purpose was to identify the qualities which make teachers particularly successful in the context of a school in a low socio-economic area.

A recent *New Zealand Herald* article (19 Nov 1999) gave front page coverage to the fact that Southern Cross Campus, a Decile 1 school in South Auckland, had received its first positive report from the Education Review Office. Recent developments within the school were described as 'remarkable' by the ERO. The sting in the tail of this media report was the very last sentence: 'The report said the school still faced a number of challenges and identified teacher quality as a barrier to student learning'.

Reports similar to the one above were a part of the impetus for our research project. We suggest that the particular skills required to teach successfully in a low decile school mean that much more is asked and expected of these teachers. We know from our research and from our school visiting that there are many successful and many exceptional teachers working in Decile 1-3 schools. Media reports have a demoralising effect on all teachers. The ramifications of public condemnation are more likely to be teacher exodus than improvement - particularly as funding for professional development is very limited in some low decile schools.

This paper describes aspects of three pods of interviews surrounding exceptional teachers. It is possible that the other six identified teachers will not share the attitudes and beliefs summarised here. Other notable findings emerged in the pods of interviews. Complete findings will be published in mid 2000. We suggest that the evidence from these three women provides some clear indicators for success in Auckland's low decile schools. Indicators from the entire project could inform future pre-service teacher training, in-service professional development and - particularly - teacher selection processes.

At this point some significant questions have emerged for us:

⁵ A daily newspaper with the largest circulation in New Zealand

How important is 'ethnic match' between teacher and student in low decile schools? Our limited data to date is indicating that this issue is not vital.

Would these three teachers, and our future interviewees, be exceptional in other school contexts? We suspect that Bev, Eve and Catherine would be exceptional teachers in all schools. Is there an X factor which is required to be an exceptional teacher in a low decile school which is not required in a high decile school? We suspect that there is an X factor and our future findings may answer these questions.

No reira.

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